

# From the Bibliotheca Alexandriana to the New Library of Alexandria Basic Mission Statements of the Libraries in Changing Times

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## Abstract

Education needed writing and books from the very beginning and the place of orientation in accumulated knowledge became the library. Kings and emperors who were fond of science liked to possess the entire tradition in their libraries. The first universal, all inclusive library in Alexandria came into being with this very purpose. The question, however, is whether it was the only purpose the founders had in mind. With the re-establishment of the Library of Alexandria in 2002 another question rises: what was the purpose of its founders? How did they manage to realize their goal? Is there a difference between the two acts of foundation? Is there a difference in purpose and intention between the Library of Alexandria and national libraries?

The discussions turned around four major issues: what is the purpose of the establishment (**to found**), what will the library be like as a building, workplace and what the process of work will there be like (**to integrate**), how should the library take care of the preservation of documents (**to preserve**), and how should the collection of tradition be used (**to create**).

## Keywords:

*Cultural heritage; Library history; National libraries; Librarianship*

*Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*  
(Bernard de Morval †1140)

The motto of my lecture is from Bernard de Morval of his *De contemptu mundi* (I,952). The meaning of this quotation is complex and can be interpreted in different ways. I think it sums up the meaning of all libraries and, in a wider sense, that of all public collections. The same idea led Umberto Eco to choose the very same motto as the title – „*The Name of the Rose*” – of his book on the library and of the librarian. I would like to believe that my lecture will shed light on the meaning of this quotation.

Reading and writing have a double root. On one hand, they allowed individuals and the society to satisfy their desire to pass down their memories to the next generations while on the other hand, agreements (laws) regulating the life of society could be formulated and made public. Libraries as institutions came to life not only to preserve the ever growing number of written documents. Along with the institutionalisation of the keeping of legal and economic documents the collection of pieces of our written cultural heritage also began. These collections were named by expressions which are translated today as „archives” or „libraries”. These two institutions separated when profit-making legal activities were added to the archival jobs (the preservation of documents). From this moment on libraries became independent and little by little other objects such as *studiolo* or curiosity chambers were added to books. When these latter ones became independent the first museums were founded. Later on these museums will have their own libraries as well.

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The strategic planning of this new collection was not made by one single library or the librarians of one single nation. Taking a look at the discussions on the establishment of the new Library of Alexandria we can have a clear picture of what librarians, politicians and representatives of the intelligentsia think of the role of libraries at the turn of the third *millenium*. Let me state right away that the activity of a library in these discussions is, by no means, confined to the mere technical role of an information centre. The discussions turned around four major issues: what is the purpose of the establishment (**to found**), what will the library be like as a building, workplace and what the process of work ill there be like (**to integrate**), how should the library take care of the preservation of documents (**to preserve**), and how should the collection of tradition be used (**to create**).

### **To Found**

Alexandria in Ancient Times realized the idea of an ambitious emperor and the scholars around him. They collected all written documents of the world known then in one library so that they could be used by the few scholars there. One should not, however, forget about the representational role the library played to display royal power. Now the new Library of Alexandria has a wider scope and is includes more in space and naturally in time. It collects the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Bible, the Vedas, as well as the written pieces of our cultural heritage from the antiquities, the classics of the Confucians and the Koran. The new Library of Alexandria documents the history of these pieces of our cultural heritage, the inner structure of these texts, the process of their canonization, the history of their influence in religion, society and politics as well as in the history of ideas. The founding collection of 4 million items is therefore encyclopedic by nature (it is not the national library of Egypt). The act of foundation carries an important political message: it aims to present a universal and integral tradition where pieces build on one another in opposition to the growing differences in political views of the countries belonging to the different cultural traditions.

Those who read the international secondary literature of the history of libraries are not be surprised by the fact that there is no one single book which carries the title: „the History of Libraries”. On the other hand, there are innumerable books such as „The History of Books”, or „The History of Book Printing”, or „The History of Selling Books”, or „The History of Reading”. Although the individual histories of libraries do share common elements but their foundation, their role in society and their use carry individual characteristics different in each society. The foundation of national libraries took place in many ways and there are different interpretations even of the same national library. This latter aspect is especially important nowadays when we are celebrating the anniversaries of their foundations and when the issue – what is a national library? – is raised again in several ways. The fact that this question is more than timely could be seen in a very special way at the „foundation” of the German National Library in 2006 when the „Deutsche Bibliothek” of Frankfurt became the „Deutsche Nationalbibliothek” by a new law. Before this law was passed there had been a heated discussion in the German Parliament around questions whether there had been a national library at all in Germany politically united since Bismark, or do Germans need a national library at all. Everybody knows that with early Christianisation the first libraries were soon founded in German territories and that each German Elector founded his own library on his land (in German generally called Landesbibliothek, however in Bayern and Prussia Staatsbibliothek). Without interrupting the topic outlined in the introduction I must mention

here that it is not by chance that there were so many pieces in the discussion connecting the rise of national pride experienced during the Football World Cup of 2006 with the issue of the German national library. It is also not by accident that in the integrating Europe the notion of „nation” is to be reconsidered at the celebration of each national library’s anniversary. To finish this detour I would like to state that I find the public discussion of this issue very positive since it contributes to preserving the cultural diversity of Europe.

Returning to our subject which is the history of the foundations of national libraries we should touch on the question expressed so well by the title of the conference to be held in Paris on Mathias Hunyadi in 2008: *Mathias Corvin et les bibliothèques princières à l’origine de l’État moderne*. The libraries of dukes in quattrocento and cinquecento, besides being means of representation of power, show the tendency described by political science as the appearance of the modern state. Let me mention a few examples here to briefly touch on the different historical traditions. In Italy a number of aristocratic libraries were founded in the 15th and 16th centuries (Sforza, Medici, Este, Aragon, etc.) which, in their collections, were all suitable to serve as a base for the national library of the unified Italy but were too much connected to familial and territorial traditions. This is why two new – national collections (of modern approach based on legal deposit) were established, one in Rome and the other one in Florence. The idea of a legal deposit, besides being a means of the representation of power, is a sign of the appearance of or more precisely the intention of establishing the modern nation state. It not by accident that this idea came up first in France and England (Frances 1<sup>er</sup>, Henry VIII) where the royal libraries served later as a basis for the national libraries. The unification of the Iberian kingdoms and the expulsion of the Arabs of the Iberian Peninsula took place when an ambitious royal dynasty, the Hapsburgs, unified large territories of Europe under their rule. In the central (if I may put it this way) Hapsburg countries such as Spain and Austria the royal (emperor’s) library could not become the national library of all the peoples united under their rule. The royal collection of the Netherlands (Orange-Nassau dynasty) which gained independence early got scattered, thus could not form the basis of the national library of the Netherlands so it had to be founded (1798). The national library of Belgium is called „Royal Library” even today named after their first national king (Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1<sup>er</sup>) in spite of the fact that it was Mary of Hapsburg, the widow of Louis I, king of Croatia and Hungary, being the stateholder (stadhouder) in the Low Countries, who created the library which later served as a basis of the national library by integrating the library of Mechelen of Margaret of Hapsburg into her collections gathered in Brussels from her different castles. The history of the national libraries of the nations in Central-Europe and the Baltiques is almost entirely unrelated to royal collections of books. The smaller school, university or society libraries which typically gained national character in the 19th century and served later as basis of national libraries of newly independent states, were all formed under Swedish, German, Hapsburg, Russian or Hungarian rule. This is why the title of the conference held in Budapest in 2002 on this subject was formulated as „*Les bibliothèques centrales et la construction des identités collectives*”. There are countries where the invader supported the establishment of the first collections. A good example of this is the history of the Finnish National Library. In the Thirty-Year War the army of the Swedish king Gustaf Adolf took the library of the Strahov Prémontré monastery in Prague to Turku where a university based on this collection was also founded in 1640. Although this library burned down along with the city itself in 1827 and the library was newly founded in Helsinki in the centre of the Russian Grand Duchy with substantial help from the tsar, the year of foundation of the Finnish National Library is yet celebrated as 1640, the year when the University of Turku was established.

I would also like to speak of the national libraries of the Carpathian Basin. Mathias Hunyadi established one of the biggest libraries of Europe at the end of the 15th century. At the end of his life his ambition to become an emperor led him to take Vienna where he played a role in the establishment of the royal library – this view is shared even by some Austrian historians. The Bibliotheca Corvina of Buda, however, could not serve as the basis of any of the peoples living in the Carpathian Basin and interestingly enough even today no nation is interested in connecting the foundation of their national libraries with the Corvina.

Ferenc Széchényi when offering his own library along with his collection of museum pieces for the benefit of the national culture in 1802 clearly formulated its purpose which has defined the fundamental job for our library ever since then: the collection of hand written or printed documents of Hungarian connection. The foundation itself carried a political message which was clearly understood not only by the historians of the 20th century but by his contemporaries as well.

The nobility of Hungary (and not just the nobles of Hungarian origin) of the 18th century were both faced with the Habsburg's government policy to centralize and unify each branch of the state administration and with the tendency to achieve German dominance. The protestant aristocracy took up as their main job the support of their church institutions. Both in Transylvania (the Telekis, the Bethlens, etc.) and in Hungary (the Rédeys, the Radvánszkys, etc.) this support was always connected with the development of libraries. The bibliophile aristocracy and church leadership of the 18th century knew very well that their libraries were not only means of accumulating wealth or places of scholarship or centres for cultural management but were also the storehouses of the written documents of our cultural heritage which preserve sometimes the only existing original or its copy testifying of our ancestors' thoughts. The year 1802 could very well be considered as a mile stone in the history of library in the Carpathian Basin since during the preceding two centuries the aristocratic courts and the historical churches served to supplement the missing cultural management of the royal court and created the basis for the modern central (national) as well as the public library network. The idea of the establishment of Hungarian national library rose along with the idea of the foundation of the national scholarly society, the national academy of science. Since there was no national ruler this role was naturally played by the Hungarian aristocracy. Some founded institutions of higher education (the Festetich family), some like Klimó established libraries while others like Teleki founded libraries for the academy.

The „document of Hungarian interest” („Hungaricum”) meant for Széchényi and his contemporaries manuscript or printed sources related to the historical territory of Hungary. Széchényi did not establish a „*Bibliotheca nationalis*” but a „*Bibliotheca Regnicolaris*” that is the library of the peoples of Hungary. This is why the Széchényi National Library became a central collection of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. This is true even if in the first half of the 19th century the ethnic minorities of Hungary founded their own central collections (museums and libraries) one after the other as background institutions to their national cultural identities which have served this purpose in the past one and a half or two centuries. The Romanians of Transylvania established their collections in Balázsfalva, the Saxons in Nagyszeben (Bruckenthal Museum), the Serbs in Újvidék, the Croatian in Zagreb and the Slovaks in Túrócszentmárton. These latter collections have very interesting histories themselves which is at some places interpreted today as precedents to their national libraries, an example to this is, among others, the Croatian National Library.

### **To integrate**

The building of the Library of Alexandria in antiquity is known from epic sources to be the place of scholarly work where scholars and their disciples lived together. The building of the

present day Library of Alexandria (80,000 square metres) and its facilities were designed and built in a way that the library can really be the place of work for librarians and researchers where doctoral schools can flourish (in the history of books and in information technology). Electronic catalogues, bibliographies and electronically designed expert systems serve as means of orientation. It is the belief of the new founders that the library works with the help of the texts on the texts for the sake of reading. The library is a workshop for making people read in a wider sense (copying, publishing, microfilms and digitalisation). The core is untouched. What changes with years is the quantity and the technology. The newly established Library of Alexandria is a proof that we have reached the point in the history of libraries in terms of being public when internet is what provides access for the public while the library itself as a building and as place of work is becoming the museum of books, scholarly training and research centre. The library is the place to preserve tradition and is the symbol of family, dynastic, institutional and cultural continuity. Alexandria itself is the symbol of universal cultural continuity.

The European national libraries are the places and symbols of the preservation of each country's national cultural continuity. The public access and the scholarly use of their collections are organic parts of the process through which public library systems have been formed in each country. The European model can be summed up by mentioning three elements: the initiatives of the Humanists, the educational and cultural program of the Reformation movement, and, on the part of some of the monarchs, responsible aristocrats and church leaders, the promotion of national culture. It was not until the end of the 18th century and the first part of the 19th century that reading circles and public libraries were formed.

Each national library should have, as a goal, wider cooperation with institutions of higher education and of the academy of sciences as well as aiming to become a centre of research in the history of books and library science in the spirit declared by the new Library of Alexandria.

### **To Preserve**

The cultural heritage of societies based on written culture is more or less continuous. Scriptors (printers and publishers), authors, the interpreters of their work as well as librarians are key figures in this process. Let me go back to the motto of my lecture at this point. The role of the librarian in providing cultural continuity is important primarily because they preserve documents trusted on to them „under their names” and without interpreting them. A librarian does not interpret the contents of the text, does not try to decipher their enigmatic meaning, does not enter into polemy with its contents from scientific, political or moral aspects.

In the history of libraries it was the time when the introduction of legal deposits took place that preservation without selection became possible. The documents themselves and their „names or entries” are to be preserved. Preservation, however, is a more complex job. Physical conservation itself requires serious knowledge, continuously developing technologies and funds. The preservation of the „name” is one of the classic jobs of a librarian that is the continues preparation of catalogues and bibliographies. However, passing down tradition is also part of the process of preservation. This latter has lost some of its importance due to the great number of documents but in the past a significant number of texts were preserved this way. Defining the „name” of the document or creating an entry is not always easy and requires scholarship in itself.

### **To Create**

Copying was an important part of the activities in the Library of Alexandria in ancient times while a lot of new texts were created in the library the copying of which had to be arranged as

well. The Library of Alexandria of the 21st century wants to present itself as a centre for scholarly research and carries out publishing in the subjects mentioned before.

Public collections are not only the venues of basic research in history. The scientific processing of public collections is done on the entirety of the collection without being evaluative („*nomina nuda tenemus*”). The result of this process can, therefore, be used by others, by anybody in fact. Research at public collections should, in principle, be valued more today when the possibilities of research in humanities and social sciences are changing fast with the development of new technologies. Possibilities provided by new technology cannot even be tried out without contents. Basic research and providing contents, therefore, are tightly connected areas. Their unity can be guaranteed by public collections because they are to present the entirety of the contents and because they are technically equipped to do so.

Referring back to the previous train of thoughts („to preserve”) let me mention here the newest chapter in palimpsest research. Now there is a digital technology which allows us to reconstruct erased texts up to three layers. Many of the texts from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages can now be discovered but this work can only be done in libraries through the scientific processing of the collection.

Each type of public collection created its discipline which has a well-organized network of institutions (museology, archival science, library science). To do research in the field of these disciplines is also one of the scientific activities carried out in public collections.

To end this lecture let me refer to the name of the rose again: „*Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*”. Libraries can carry out their mission unchanged from the times of their foundation only if they undertake the preservation of the entirety of the documents they have been entrusted with without bias and by taking part in the process of passing cultural heritage down in a wider sense. Librarians can accomplish their jobs if they do not want to become writers, polemic philosophers or politicians. Instead they strive to pass down cultural heritage at the place assigned to them in the division of this work. If they make the information (the name of the rose) publically available without selection using modern technology and if they do research (naming) of the highest scientific standard.

National libraries, however, are called for something more. By the fact that the written heritage of a society sharing the same cultural heritage is concentrated into and is presented as a collection the unity of the collection can and has to be interpreted in itself, and, in fact, has already been interpreted by the members of the society. Public collections preserve and present the members of the society with a common ground, a base where they belong. This common ground or base does not, however, belong to one ethnic community only. The histories of the national libraries from their foundation have illustrated the diversity of different communities belonging together. The modern Library of Alexandria will need a long time to become the national library of the world. The European Library will also have to step over the stage and the concept of being a shared surface of the catalogues of all the European National Libraries. This stage is overpassed if the individual national libraries in Europe will survive and if they effectively manage to preserve their cultural diversity stressed so much in political slogans. If it is reached then Europe itself will have a firmer foundation in opposition to the present political and economic alliance based on globally defined foundations. The preservation of cultural diversity, in fact, requires independence of each nation. Independence is based on an integrated system of institutions which allow the society to preserve and get to know their past. National libraries are such institutions.